Dear Editors:

In his Economists’ Voice column, Gary Becker provides an interesting defence of capital punishment. His argument hinges on the deterrence effect. While the strength of this effect is a matter of some debate, he argues that even where less than one innocent life is saved as a result of killing a guilty murderer, society may benefit from capital punishment, since the positive value to society of the murderer is likely to be less than that of the innocent victim. “A comparison of the qualities of individual lives has to be part of any reasonable social policy.”

This statement is far from innocuous—especially so if we remove it from the emotive context of capital punishment. It begs the question of who should make the decision about the qualities of individual lives. If different people are to carry different weights in society’s welfare function, how should democracy work? Do currently installed governments have a mandate to make decisions on this? Should weights be based on criminal records, access to welfare payments, education, gross income, or contributions to party funds?

All this is not to suggest that economists can, or should, refrain from making comparisons of the qualities of individual lives. Indeed we cannot avoid doing so, for assigning an equal weight to each individual involves making comparisons just as does the assignment of unequal weights. But
reaching a judgement that at the margin one life is worth more or less than another is something that we should do only in the most exceptional of circumstances, and in full cognisance of the implications. For amongst those implications is the undermining of much of our discipline as we know it. Utilitarianism would be out, and with it much of welfare economics. Even the invisible hand, which provides the intellectual foundation of free market economies, and which assumes that one agent’s welfare is worth the same as another’s, would be seriously compromised.

Now that’s a funny thing to come out of Chicago!

Geraint Johnes
Professor of Economics, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, UK

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING